What is Psychoanalysis For?

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In a clinical seminar, Bion once said: 'Of course we believe … that analysis is helpful. But that belief is liable to hide from us the extraordinary nature, the mystery of psychoanalysis' (Bion, 1987: 17). What kind of thing is psychoanalysis, and why does the world have psychoanalysis in it? By the end of my lecture, I hope this query into mystery will have folded back into the clinical situation, and we shall see a striking parallel between what happens between patient and analyst, and what psychoanalysis is doing in the wider cultural landscape.

Years ago, when the Institute of Psychoanalysis did regular events linked to art exhibitions, theatre productions and so on, it tended to be Independent analysts who took the lead in setting these up and participating in them. I think the link between the clinical situation, and broader aspects of the psychoanalytic enterprise, is especially part of the Independent tradition, and I hope my talk this evening will be an example of that.

Freud knew he did not invent psychoanalysis from scratch. More than once he commented that great novelists and dramatists before him understood the kinds of emotional conflict he was investigating, and his ideas about unconscious psychic processes were anticipated by philosophers such as Schopenhauer and von Hartmann.

But if he did not invent it, did Freud discover psychoanalysis? Not in the sense that Columbus discovered America, or Marie Curie radioactivity. Those were both out there already, waiting to be found. Freud brought something new into being.

And if Freud did not discover psychoanalysis, nor invent it entirely on his own, does this not remind us of the following?

It is a matter of agreement … that we will never ask the question: "Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?" … No decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated.

(Winnicott, 1971: 12)

This is Winnicott's famous conundrum, his profound insight into the quality of emerging mind in the infant's transitional space, and what it requires to flourish. The transitional space of infancy develops into the play space of childhood and later life. Transitional and play spaces have a quality that Winnicott called 'intermediate', in that they are neither purely external nor purely internal to us but partake of both. Winnicott emphasised the continuity and persistence of this space. It operates far beyond the consulting-room, and throughout the whole of life. It is an arena of creativity, and the best description of how psychoanalysis came into being might be that Freud neither discovered nor invented it; he created it, in this intermediate space.

Winnicott called this 'the place where we live' (1971: 104–110), and I have suggested that we can read this as 'the place in which we become fully alive' (Parsons, 2014: 5). One answer to the question in my title would be that psychoanalysis is for helping people become as fully alive as they have it in them to be: 'people' meaning analytic patients (as well as those who analyse them); and — as I hope to show this evening — humankind in general.

This intermediate space takes on various guises, characterised by the kind of object that exists in them. In transitional space there exist the transitional objects of infancy. In the play space exist the games children create, which develop later into the abstract sophistication of chess and the violent artistry of the World Cup and Wimbledon. Winnicott also described this area as 'the location of cultural experience' (1971: 95–103). This is a more developed version of transitional space, and I propose to call the things that exist in it 'cultural objects'.

Winnicott mentions the arts, religion and philosophy as exemplifying this area of cultural experience (Winnicott, 1971: 14). I would add science to the list. Psychoanalysis, being neither discovered nor invented, but created in this intermediate area, is a similar entity. This matters.

Where science is concerned, there is a debate about its nature that reveals its intermediate quality very clearly. From what is called a realist perspective, scientific facts are truths about a pre-existing reality, impersonally discovered by the rational evaluation of objective evidence. From a so-called constructivist perspective, decisions about methodology, and negotiations between scientists about what constitutes valid evidence, continually influence which scientific facts are decided upon as being true (Parsons, 2014: 70–71). This is a dispute between those on the one hand who are saying: 'You discovered this as a pre-existing fact in the external world', and those who are saying: 'This fact is something you conceived of from inside yourself, by your own mental processes'. The dispute never gets resolved because, it seems to me, Science — to personify it — does not realise that it is an object in the intermediate area where the question of which statement is true must not be formulated.

The same issue appears in a different way where art is concerned. The classical view was that painting aimed to give a realistic depiction of the external world. Developments in art brought this more and more into question, until abstract art abandoned literal representation altogether, producing images that emerged entirely from the artist's imagination. The world of art has had to give up trying to ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?'

Freud was famously hostile to religion. What he criticised was a religion that presented itself as a set of truths coming from outside in the form of revelation or dgmatic authority. A non-realist view of religion, on the other hand, denies that God has any existence beyond what humanity attributes to him. In the words of Don Cupitt, a non-realist theologian: 'God is the sum of our values, representing to us their ideal unity, their claims upon us and their creative power' (Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*). The fruitless argument dichotomy between these two positions comes from insisting on the question that Winnicott said should not be asked.

There is, however a theological concept of God as both transcendent and immanent. Being transcendent on the one hand, God exists unapproachably beyond the material world, and cannot be encountered in any human experience. He is also, on the other hand, immanent, meaning that he manifests himself through the material world and in the depths of the human psyche. This concept of God as both immanent and transcendent seems to me a very Winnicottian recognition that religion occupies this intermediate area, where the 'internal or external' question is not to be formulated.

The same question turns up again in philosophy. In one way or another, all its various branches debate whether philosophy aims to arrive at demonstrable truths about reality or to express as clearly as possible how human beings conceive of the world. The debate is endless because

philosophy also is a cultural object in this intermediate area where a choice of either external or internal reality, to the exclusion of the other, is by definition impossible.

The intermediate space these cultural objects occupy makes creativity intrinsic to them. It is in the nature of cultural objects, therefore, that they continue to grow. One cannot imagine an end-point for science or philosophy when all discoveries have been made, all questions answered, and scientists and philosophers are out of a job; nor a time when religion or art comes to the end of its road and no further development of them is possible. It would be a similar mistake to think psychoanalysis can ever stop evolving and developing. Any idea of establishing some final and definitive correct version of psychoanalysis would be misguided.

For analysts, Freud himself becomes what is presented to them from outside. But simply learning what Freud thought, signing up to it and putting it into practice is no way to become an analyst. Other important figures have emerged in the history of psychoanalysis, but any external account of it, however authoritative, can only be half the picture. It is necessary, of course, for analysts to learn about psychoanalysis, but they also have to make their own fresh discovery of it. For analysts to do something from inside themselves with what is presented to them from outside is the only way their work can be creative. I think analysts have a responsibility to foster this in themselves: a responsibility to their own psychic development; to the future development of psychoanalysis; and to their patients. Patients sense, consciously and unconsciously, what is going on, consciously and unconsciously, in their analysts. Analysts offer their patients something from the outside, hoping that patients will do something from inside themselves with what they offer. If analysts are not doing this on their own account, in the intermediate area of this thing called psychoanalysis, it is less likely to happen for patients in the intermediate area between them and the analyst.

I suggest that cultural objects represent the collective epistemophilic instinct of humanity. Freud introduced the epistemophilic instinct, Klein elaborated the concept, and Bion developed it into his theory of the K link. This posits the desire to know and understand as an essential mode of relating between individuals, and between human beings and the world around them. I think humanity does have an innate need to make sense of, and give meaning to, the world it lives in. Philosophy, science, religion, art and psychoanalysis are all examples of how it tries to do so.

How does psychoanalysis set about this? Freud thought he knew what he was creating, and to an extent he did: a new theoretical understanding of the mind, a psychological research method, and a therapeutic technique. What he created, though, was only ever going to be the start of the story. Freud's setting for the clinical practice of analysis was unprecedented. It took time, however, to appreciate that this framework, of the fundamental rule for the patient plus the analyst's free-floating attention, constituted not only a new form of therapy but, as Christopher Bollas (2007: 13f) has emphasised, a new, previously non-existent, kind of object relationship.

A relationship that was in some way or other therapeutic was not a new idea, of course. The doctor-patient relationship was of long standing. Before that ever existed, people were taking their dreams to temple priests for interpretation. The church confessional confers absolution in exchange for penitence. These aim to improve people's physical health, to guide their life decisions and to change their standing in the eyes of God. What none of them seeks is to bring about an inner psychological transformation. Nearer the mark for this would be the relationship of a spiritual guide to a disciple; or that of a Platonist to the pupil he is leading out of the Cave to

apprehend the Idea of the Good. Freud would have had no truck with either of these, so disdainful was he of religion and philosophy. In fact, his difference from them was radical.

To think people could change by applying religious discipline to their thoughts and feelings, or by directing them down certain philosophical avenues, implies that they know what their thoughts and feelings are, and have control over them. Freud's insight was that the people who came to him, far from being transparent to themselves like that, were governed by thoughts and feelings of which they were unaware. This led to his theories of psychic structure; his discovery that free association revealed a person's unconscious psychic activity; his use of interpretation to modify that unconscious activity; and his recognition of the transference as both obstacle and ally. All this is not yet what I mean by a new kind of object relationship. It still belongs to a scenario of one person using his, or her, therapeutic expertise to make another better. For all Freud's support of lay analysis, he nonetheless regularly refers to the analyst as 'the doctor'.

It is a step outside the consulting-room, to realise that not only those who need analysis, but all people without exception, are subject to their unconscious mental processes: that it is part of the human condition to be opaque to oneself. Psychoanalysis works to bring what is unconscious into consciousness; but no amount of this will abolish the unconscious mind. It remains as powerful, and as unconscious, as it ever was. This applies to the analyst as well as the patient. What analysts call — perhaps rather automatically — the 'analytic relationship' is a relationship based on the recognition that neither of the participants will ever understand himself or herself fully. One of them is aware of this, the other comes to understand it. It is like a river journey: the one at the helm does most of the steering, the other most of the paddling; but they are in the same boat.

This, then, is the previously unknown form of object relationship: one whose aim is to increase self-knowledge, especially in one of the participants; but which, at the same time, exposes both of them to the inevitable failure of their self-knowledge. However, facing the impact of this is exactly what fuels the work towards self-knowledge and self-understanding that psychoanalysis makes possible. The fundamental dialogue implicit in such a relationship might go something like this:

Do you realise you don't understand yourself as well as you think you do?

What do you mean? I don't know what you are getting at.

(Later) *Yes, I begin to see. There really is a lot going on in me that I don't know about. Maybe more than I will ever be able to know about … But if that's what it is like for everyone, mustn't the same be true of you?*

It must be, mustn't it, if I'm human too? Where do you suppose that leaves the two of us?

Bollas (2007) called the arrival of this new kind of relationship 'The Freudian Moment'. It is a good phrase, provided we recognise the moment as an extended one. Great creators in any field cannot know the potential reach, and the latent implications, of what they create, and this certainly applies to Freud. The Freudian moment continues to unfold. I have said that the cultural objects I am discussing, by virtue of the intermediate space they occupy, are inherently creative. Psychoanalysis being one of these, there is no way for it to stop developing.

To suggest that cultural objects represent the epistemophilic instinct of humanity is to say that they are interlocking aspects of humanity's collective attempt to understand itself. Science, art, philosophy and religion go back into the mists of time. Psychoanalysis is different. It came into

being over a five to ten year period at the turn of the 20th century, and owes its existence to one individual. So how does it fit in? What is its relationship to the others?

I am going to focus on the relation of psychoanalysis to just two of the others — science and religion — for the following reason. Freud viewed these two in diametrically opposite ways. And yet, as we shall wee, the underlying relation of psychoanalysis to each of them is curiously similar. This unexpected similarity, in such apparently different contexts, may suggest an answer to the question in my title: What is psychoanalysis for?

Being trained as an empirical scientist, Freud regarded scientific method as the only way to establish the nature of reality. It was crucially important to him that psychoanalysis should be scientific, and there has indeed been much debate about this. Some have taken the same stand as Freud and claimed that psychoanalysis does meet criteria for being scientific, while others see it as a different kind of discipline; not a scientific one but, for example, hermeneutic, meaning that its business is to interpret meaning rather than to discover facts about the mind. I am not taking sides in this argument. I want to query its underlying assumptions.

When it is asked whether psychoanalysis is scientific or not, there seems to be an assumption that we know what science is and we know what psychoanalysis is, so the question of whether they overlap or not should be straightforward. But it is not that simple. What scientific knowledge consists of is a complex issue. Psychoanalysis has been called unscientific on the grounds that it cannot be empirically falsified: a contrary observation can always be explained away. However, problems with Karl Popper's (1934/1980) view that science is defined by being falsifiable led to Thomas Kuhn's (1970) concept of scientific paradigms, which allowed for theories to be preserved against disconfirmation by revising their background definitions.

This is just as much a debate about the nature of science as about the nature of analysis.

One might claim that psychoanalysis is a unique kind of science whose specific domain is the analytic setting, which is the only place where observations can be made or theories tested. However, it could be argue that the clinical situation alone cannot confirm theories. However often you observe that A is followed by B, this is not enough. What about the turkey who, after eleven months of happiness, concludes that the world is a good place? You must also deliberately set up the not-A situation and see whether B happens under those conditions. This cannot be done by uncontrolled clinical observations which do not specifically test for negatives. This argument against the scientific status of psychoanalysis can only make its point by asserting its own account of the nature of scientific method.

Alternatively, one might say that psychoanalysis is rooted in the clinical situation, but its hypotheses need testing outside it, and clinical data require independent scrutiny, through recordings. This is to say that psychoanalysis can only be scientific if its research data are publicly available. Such a view takes objectivity to be a primary criterion of scientific knowledge. But here also, the debate is about the nature of science. All scientific observation depends on existing theories and preconceptions, and questions about the subjective involvement of the knower with what is known are inescapable. The concept of objectivity cannot be taken for granted.

Science may also be understood as a conceptual network, where constructs are defined by their links to other concepts, and by principles governing the relations between different elements in the network. On this view, psychological constructs — like repression, the superego or unconscious phantasy — would be on a par with physical constructs like chemical reactions

or brain mechanisms. If there is a network of theory that allows one to operate with them, then they are scientific concepts. If this is the basis for claiming that psychoanalysis is scientific, we shall agree or disagree, not according to what we think about psychoanalysis, but according to whether we agree with this view of science.

All these examples show that what appears as a discussion about whether psychoanalysis is scientific cannot be separated from a discussion about the nature of science itself. But these different views of the way in which psychoanalysis might be scientific are based on different views of psychoanalysis as well. Its nature is no more fixed and established than that of science. The debate between the two is far from a matter of knowing what each one is, and then seeing if they overlap. Psychoanalysis, in describing itself as scientific, calls on science to look further into what being scientific means. Science challenges psychoanalysis in return to keep developing its own sense of what psychoanalysis consists of. There is no simple 'Yes or No' issue here, but a larger, more interesting, and more mobile question about how we come to know ourselves and the world we live in. Psychoanalysis and science reciprocally push each other forward, and this interaction between them pushes forward the overall way in which humanity understands itself.

While Freud was determined for psychoanalysis to be seen as scientific, he was insistent that it was incompatible with religion. How much these are opposite sides of the same coin appears at the end of his most important anti-religious text, 'The future of an illusion' (Freud, 1927: 56). Its last sentence reads: 'No, our science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere'. Two friends of Freud's responded to his paper. Oskar Pfister, a Lutheran pastor, wrote a rejoinder called 'The illusion of a future'. Freud attacked religion's role on three counts: as a belief system; as a basis for morality; and as an instrument of social organization. Pfister claimed that Freud misrepresented what belief, morality, and religious fellowship mean. To engage with Freud's critique, Pfister had to answer questions of his own about what religion consists of. Something similar happens, more clearly still, in the exchange with Romain Rolland. Rolland was a writer, musicologist and art historian, and a student of Indian mysticism, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1916. When Freud sent him a copy of 'The future of an illusion', Rolland regretted that Freud dealt only with the dogmas and institutions of religion, without considering the nature of spontaneous religious feeling. Rolland described what he called an 'oceanic' feeling, 'a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded' (Freud, 1930: 64). Freud took 17 months to reply to Rolland's letter, and when he did respond he said the description of the oceanic feeling had left him no peace. He wrote: 'Please don't expect any evaluation of the oceanic feeling: I am experimenting only with an analytical version of it; I am clearing it out of the way, so to speak'. Pfister counters Freud on his own ground, but Rolland undercuts Freud's whole argument, saying that what he is attacking is not what religion is really about at all. Instead, he points to religion as an irreducible element in human experience. What matters is not whether some dogma is true or false, or why we should accept certain moral precepts, but how to make sense of something that wells up from inside oneself.

The Anglican priest Rodney Bomford (1999, 2006) has written about the relevance for religion of the idea of the unconscious, especially as conceptualised by Matte Blanco. This dialogue with psychoanalysis compels him, however, to reconsider religious language in terms of its level of significance. Assertions about God, he says, have different meanings according to the language — empirical, mythical or mystical — in which they are couched. Pfister, Rolland and Bomford all

illustrate how engaging in dialogue with psychoanalysis calls on religion to investigate its own nature as clearly as possible.

What about traffic in the other direction? We saw that when psychoanalysis calls on science to reassess what it means to be scientific, analysis must be ready for science in turn to make the same demand on itself. Does the same apply where religion is concerned?

Rolland's response to Freud is an example of this challenge. If psychoanalysis wants to interact more fruitfully with religious ideas than simply clearing them out of the way, it may need to find fresh concepts of its own. David Black has suggested that religion may be the realm of a specific kind of internal object. These are not the familiar sort of (as Black puts it): 'fantasised figures, in interaction with one another or the ego, derived from an interplay of projection and introjection, and linking ultimately to the earliest events of babyhood' (Black, 1993: 617). They are a different sort of internal object, derived from a cultural tradition, which give meaning to a person's experience by placing it in a context that encompasses all existence. Here is a new analytic concept, generated by a dialogue with religion.

Another example is Bion's concept of 'faith'. Bion (1970/1977a) says that when a patient's psyche is truly touched, the analyst knows this by a process of direct intuition that is not mediated by ordinary sense-perception. How to conceptualise an experience that carries the conviction of truth, but which depend on the experience of the senses?

'Faith' is a term denoting exactly this conviction of the reality of something that cannot be proved by sensory experience. Importing the concept into psychoanalysis, Bion called it 'F', to try and shed its overtly religious connotations. If F is not directed towards sensory experience, what is the object that it does apprehend? Bion's answer is: a reality, for which he uses the symbol 'O', that has the quality of absoluteness. What patient's say and how they behave in a session belong to the realm of sensory experience. Bion calls them 'transformations' — we might say 'expressions' — of the ultimate reality of that human being, which is only imperfectly revealed by what the analyst hears and sees.

Bion could make use in this way of what looked like a religious concept because he understood religion, not as a belief system, but as an area of human experience.

Certain problems can be handled by mathematics, others by economics, others by religion. It should be possible to transfer a problem, that fails to yield to the discipline to which it appears to belong, to a discipline that can handle it.

(Bion, 1970/1977a: 91)

All psycho-analytic progress exposes a need for further investigation. There is a 'thing-in-itself' which can never be known; by contrast, the religious mystic claims direct access to the deity with whom he aspires to be at one. Since this experience is often expressed in terms that I find it useful to borrow, I shall do so, but with a difference that brings them closer to my purpose.

(Bion, 1970/1977: 87)

The traffic does turn out to be two-way. Psychoanalysis can move religion to reconsider itself, and religion can return the compliment, impelling analysts to enlarge their understanding of psychoanalysis. The same thing is happening, in fact, between religion and psychoanalysis as between psychoanalysis and science.

I asked how psychoanalysis fits into the group of cultural objects I am discussing: what is its role among these interlocking aspects of humanity's collective attempt to understand itself? To use Winnicott's language, if we think in terms of object relating, we see the differences in how the cultural objects of science and religion relate to the object that is psychoanalysis. If we think in terms of object usage (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 88-89), however, psychoanalysis is available for science and religion to make use of in the same way: to push forward their own explorations of what they themselves consist of. The other side of the cultural bargain is that psychoanalysis should make the same use of them, suffering both of them to push forward its exploration of its own identity.

Here is the underlying similarity that I mentioned earlier; and, as I said, its unexpectedness suggests something fundamental about the role of psychoanalysis. It seems to me that psychoanalysis may fit into humanity's collective attempt to know itself, as a discipline that prompts other disciplines to question the nature of their own contributions — that is, to know themselves better; and that for psychoanalysis to be able to do this, analysts must be willing to investigate, and keep re-investigating, the nature of their own enterprise.

This interaction has a striking congruity with the interaction between patient and analyst. Psychoanalysis says to science and religion: *Our conversation calls on you to understand yourself better than you do at the moment*. And science and religion reply: *Fair enough, but in that case must not the same apply to you?*

There is no end-point to be arrived at here. Patient and analyst have to accept that, however much their work achieves in the way of self-knowledge, in the end neither of them will ever be fully transparent to themselves. Cultural objects, as I have emphasised, never stop developing. Psychoanalysts, scientists and theologians have to accept that, however much they come to understand about the nature of their work, there can never be a point of closure; they will never finally understand what it is that they are doing.

The job of psychoanalysis, in short, is to make life difficult; both for other disciplines and for itself. Knowing that there is no way ever to be certain of who one is or what one is doing, is not an easy place to be. It calls, in Bion's language, for faith in the O of psychoanalysis. But there may also be an existential relief in giving up the expectation of a safe home. Some difficulties are contingent and can be resolved. Other problems, such as squaring the circle, are logically or mathematically impossible, and there is no need to bother with them. There are other kinds of difficulty, however, which can never be resolved because they are built into the structure of the situation where they occur — and yet there is great value in going on working at them. The new kind of object relationship that Freud created showed that full understanding of themselves is impossible for human beings. On the other hand, it also showed the immense value of striving for it. I think psychoanalysis has the role of pushing itself and these other cultural objects collectively to pursue the same kind of self-understanding for humanity at large.